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# Inclusive Pedagogy

Moray House School of Education Election Briefings

Education from early years to 18  
Research and Practice Contributing to Policy

15 April 2016

## Inclusive Pedagogy

In today's schools, teachers are working with more diverse communities of learners than ever before, but they often report that they do not feel adequately prepared for the job. This briefing introduces a distinctive approach to teaching based on research into the successful practices of teachers who are able to work with a diverse range of learners whilst maintaining high levels of achievement for everyone. We highlight the implications for education policy, teacher education and career long professional learning.

### Introduction: diversity, difference and inclusive education

The increasing cultural, linguistic and developmental diversity of school communities, along with the ambition to achieve high academic standards for everybody, raises important questions about how teachers should be prepared and supported to work in today's schools. Our studies consider what can be learned from experienced teachers who are committed to supporting the participation and achievements of all students in ways that recognise difference as an ordinary aspect of human development, rather than seeing it as a problem. Three key ideas define what we have learned:

- *Everybody's different* – every person is a unique individual with multiple overlapping identities.
- *The transformability of people's capacity to learn* – teachers can and do act to enhance participation and achievement.
- *New ways of working* – teachers and other professionals work together in the widest sense, focusing on how specialist expertise can be used in ways that enhance learning without marginalising or stigmatising some learners.

## Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching that aims to raise the achievement of all children, whilst safeguarding the inclusion of those who are vulnerable to exclusion and other forms of marginalisation. Schools in Scotland and other parts of the UK have served as sites for studies that consider how teachers' values and beliefs shape the teaching and learning; how teachers in inclusive classrooms have been able to achieve good academic attainment for everyone; and, how teachers can be prepared to work with increasingly diverse groups of students.

The idea that *all* learners differ is the starting point for inclusive pedagogy but it does not mean that individual differences are unimportant. For example, in a class there may be two students that display what appear to be similar difficulties when asked to infer meaning from a text. However, if one is a learner of English as an additional language and the other is on the autism spectrum, the nature of the challenges for learning may be different. The teacher needs to use strategies that are matched to the purpose of the teaching and adapt these strategies based on her knowledge about the learners. So, in a lesson to improve reading comprehension, the teacher might introduce a story via a discussion, sharing information about a topic to support the learner for whom English is an additional language and use graphic organisers to structure and record the discussion to support the participation of the

child on the autistic spectrum. This approach would have the virtue of providing an engaging context and supportive visual cues that would benefit *all* learners, at the same time as responding to the specific needs of individual learners.

Working with the principles of inclusive pedagogy disrupts some of the assumptions and practices associated with teaching and learning. In particular, teachers are willing to accept that it is not necessary or helpful to predict or predetermine individuals' outcomes for learning *before* teaching. Rather, decisions are structured around how to ensure high levels of engagement and motivation. The power of this principle for teachers and learners alike is evident in our research with student-teachers, who used the principles for inclusive pedagogy to inform their decision-making. For example, working in a context where five children were usually separated from their class and teacher for literacy lessons, a student-teacher negotiated that the children would be given the choice to either stay in the class and work more independently, or go through to the base with the support staff. One child chose to stay. She was excited to work with everybody else and wrote an excellent poem. The student-teacher reflected that she did not think her teaching would have had such impact if she had assigned children to the opportunities or challenges for learning available, nor that the children would have felt such joy in what they created.

Inclusive pedagogy can be differentiated from other approaches by the ways that teachers respond to individual differences; the choices they make that inform how children and young people learn together; and, how they utilise specialist knowledge. For example, students who are deaf are often included in mainstream classrooms with additional support from a specialist teacher for the deaf. However, the way that the specialist teacher works with the student determines whether the practice is inclusive. If the specialist and class teachers take a team teaching approach, so that the deaf student is not isolated by the presence of an additional adult then the additional support will be beneficial. Here, it is the way that teachers work together to ensure that no one is marginalised within the classroom that is important. Moreover, with this approach, classroom teachers are not considered unqualified to teach particular learners. Rather, they are empowered to work with their colleagues to enhance the opportunities for learning they provide to everyone.

The insights from our studies, illustrated by the examples above, have been used to inform development projects across Scotland, including the STEC Framework for Inclusion which links the approach to the standards for teacher education and career long professional learning.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Although many things are done well in Scottish education, the gaps between those who achieve most and those who achieve least are a chronic problem. Moreover, studies of the complexity of practice highlight that there is not one 'gap', nor one 'solution' for how gaps can be closed. Our research suggests that approaches to teaching and learning that perpetuate the idea that 'most' students learn well and 'some' require 'extra support' undermines the unique individuality of every student by positioning some as problems. This is an important point because of the negative effects associated with the lowering of expectations that occurs when some students are thought to be less able or to belong to a different category of learner.

It is important to stop seeing some students as less able, or extra work for teachers. Taking account of difference without positioning it as a problem is encapsulated by the principles of inclusive pedagogy. This approach does not deny differences between learners but it rejects the inevitability of failure for some as the examples above show.

The principles of inclusive pedagogy are highly compatible with the ambitions of Curriculum for Excellence. Our research shows why the professionalism and collaboration of educators is central to enabling enriched and inclusive provision for diverse and changing communities.

Consideration should be given to educational reforms that support this approach to teaching and learning in schools and in teacher education and career long professional learning opportunities. Such reforms should include:

- Developing strategies that encourage the use of Additional Support for Learning resources within classroom communities;
- Extending opportunities for teacher education and professional development that support the principle that teaching is enhanced when planning for learning does not rely on notions of fixed ability; and
- Maximising the use of partnerships to enhance the effectiveness of *Getting It Right For Every Child* to meet the diverse needs of *all* children and young people.

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